

Growing Azaleas in Florida by Mike Knowlton, from the Florida Bonsai Magazine, 2016, Issue 1.

During our 11 years in Florida, it is amazing how many times we have heard – “Oh, you can’t grow azalea bonsai in Florida. For sure you can’t grow azalea bonsai below North Florida and the Panhandle.” It is a good thing that we were already committed in terms of bringing our collection of azalea bonsai south to Florida from Northern New Jersey – in fact to Southwest Florida in Venice. We might have sold them as we did other Northern species of bonsai that we knew would not survive the move from climate zone 6a to 9b.

After residing 11 years in Southwest Florida, most of our Northern azalea have not only survived, but have remained vigorous, healthy trees that bloom on a regular basis. Yes, we lost some, but I think that it was more a case of our not knowing the different techniques in caring for them in the hot, humid climate of Florida compared to the temperate Northeast than the fact that “Azalea bonsai just don’t grow in Florida.” In fact, as we have gotten more involved with BSF over the years, we have learned that azalea bonsai have been successfully grown in Southeast Florida as far south as the Fort Lauderdale/Miami area. Also, we were pleasantly surprised to see a beautiful azalea bonsai displayed at the FELAB Convention in Puerto Rico. Interestingly, one can say the same thing about Junipers. Azaleas just cannot be treated the same way in Florida as in the Northeast. In Florida, we need to be much more conservative in doing major work on both the foliage and the roots of junipers at the same time than is the case in the Northeast. In my own experience, Junipers were pretty much indestructible in the Northeast – in that respect, almost like ficus here in Florida.

Lunetta and I have always enjoyed flowering bonsai and our collection includes pomegranate, Barbados cherry, different varieties of crepe myrtle, desert rose, rosemary, loropetalum and yes, different varieties of satsuki azalea. Fortunately, we have moved beyond the trial and error method and we have learned some of the unique aspects of growing azalea bonsai in Florida, both from multiple workshops with Mike Rogers and an azalea event at ‘Bonsai at Pasimanan’ in Dade City. Also, we learned a lot about azaleas in general (not unique to Florida) from Ted Matson. For those of you who love azaleas, just because you live in Florida, you, in fact, do not need to forego the enjoyment of having them in your collection.

Here are some suggestions that we have found to be particularly helpful:

1. Azaleas are either growing and healthy, or they are dying. There is little in between. By the time that you notice something, it is often too late. Therefore prevention is the key.

2. Know the variety of satsuki azaleas that you may be buying and where they were grown. Some varieties, like deciduous satsukis simply will not grow in Florida, even North Florida because the cold dormant season is not long enough.

I have had very good results with the following varieties – wakaebisu, kasan and dwarf kasan, and chinzan. Kasan and chinzan varieties are dwarf in nature with small leaves and flowers. They are good candidates for shohin and small bonsai.

3. Azaleas are prone to various diseases. Practice good hygienic practices on your azaleas. Always disinfect all of your tools, pots and trees as you work with them. Always disinfect your tools before you move from one tree to the next. You can use a 50/50 mix of Lysol and water. After trimming and pruning your azaleas spray your disinfectant on your tree. Always use cut past on your cuts.

4. Follow a routine of both systemic insecticide and systemic fungicide. I use both Merit systemic and Cleary's systemic, applying it in early Spring and every three months during the growing season.

5. Good ventilation is important for azaleas. Lots of trees bunched close together in a stagnant area is a problem waiting to happen, particularly for azaleas. Also, remove discolored old leaves on the interior of the branches. This will promote better ventilation and will enable more sun to get into the interior of the trees.

6. Root rot is probably the single biggest problem, and it most often happens when organic soil has not been completely removed from the interior base of the tree, creating an anaerobic condition. Therefore always bare root the trees when moving from pre-bonsai organic soil to a bonsai pot. The soil needs to be well draining. While others use a 'Boon' type of mix, I have found very good results using three parts kanuma and one part pumice. Kanuma is an imported Japanese soil known for creating an acidic environment, preferred by azaleas. It is pricey and sometimes hard to get, but worth it in my opinion.

7. Azalea roots do not mind being crowded. I repot my medium and large azalas every three years and my Shohin and Mame azaleas every two years. Often the roots of azaleas being repotted come out of the pot almost in a solid block, somewhat like black pines. Carefully loosen the roots as best you can and, when necessary, cut small pie shaped pieces out of the root base when repotting.

8. Do not pot azaleas in shallow pots.

9. Do not baby your azaleas in terms of keeping them in the shade. They will be fine in full AM sun or in a filtered sun environment all day.

10. While it is always good to read books and magazine articles about growing azalea bonsai, do not pay attention to the suggested dates for repotting. The books and articles are written for *temperate northern* climates. While the books suggest repotting after flower, repot in late Winter/early Spring prior to flower. Waiting too late in Spring runs the risk of high soil temperatures which discourage azalea root growth.

11. Unlike other species, azaleas are bottom dominant, not apically dominant. Watch for aggressive bottom branch growth.

12. Trunk and nebari take time to develop and thicken. Be patient. It will eventually happen but not at the speed of tropicals.

13. Take the time to manage flower buds. Many azaleas produce too many buds to sustain through flowering. Remember that flowering takes significant energy that would otherwise go into root and foliage development. Often flower buds need to be removed to provide a more balanced, less crowded bloom. Also, cut off most, if not all of the flower buds in the late Fall prior to Spring repotting so that all the energy can go into the repotting process. Be particularly careful in avoiding too many flower buds on shohin and mame azalea. They may, in fact bloom themselves to death if not managed properly.

14. When in flower protect the tree from rain. Also, be careful when watering to avoid getting the flowers wet. The flowers will last longer and look better as a result. Manage your flowers, meaning remove them as soon as they have moved past peak. Remove the flower base as well as the flower. Never leave spent flowers on the azalea since it drains energy from the tree and the other flowers.

15. Azaleas can take significant pruning in early Spring, leaving branches with no leaves. However, always have leaves remaining on branches when pruning at times other than early Spring. Also, remember that trimming branches in late Fall will result in elimination of flower buds. This is not necessarily a bad thing if your azalea is in development and you want the energy to concentrate in your trunk and branches.

16. I use an acidic, organic fertilizer. Do not fertilize after bud set in late summer/early Fall until completion of flowering.

17. The bark of azaleas is very thin. Do not use concave cutters on azaleas. Use a root cutter and a sharp knife or razor to make a smooth cut surface. Again, always use cut paste after disinfecting the cut. When making large cuts, leave a stump to address likely die back.

18. During the Fall, reduce the grow clusters at the end of your branches to two. They often grow in clusters of three to five. This may all sound complicated, but like those of us who grow Japanese Black Pine in Florida, we find our special efforts to be well worth it. There is simply no other species that compares to a healthy azalea bonsai in full bloom. It makes one forget all the effort.